

Catastrophe Baker and the Mage of the Swirling Mists

* * * *

I ain't much of a philosopher (said Baker). Universal truths haven't got all that much to do with the hero business. I mean, when you see a dyed-in-the-wool villain doing villain-type things, you don't stop and wonder if society's to blame, or whether his punishment should fit his crimes. No, you blow the son of a bitch away and worry about it later.

So I didn't really have much initial interest in meeting up with the Mage of the Swirling Mists. The fact that people trusted him with their secrets and their hopes and their dreams didn't mean a thing to me.

What I was interested in was the Star of Bethlehem, surely the most gorgeous blue-skinned girl I've ever laid eyes on. She was some kind of mutant, what with her blue skin and orange eyes, but other than that she could have been Sinderella's better-looking twin sister, meaning no offense.

I first saw her out on Futzi Minoulli IV. She was just coming out of a hotel there, and it was love at first sight -- at least on my part. I doubt that she even saw me at all. But that didn't make no nevermind. My heart was pounding away in my chest, and my throat was getting dry, and my palms were starting to sweat, and I knew from previous experience that all of these were the symptoms of falling into eternal and undying love.

I hung around the hotel lobby for a couple of hours until she returned so I could declare my feelings and sweep her off her feet and maybe into the honeymoon suite -- but when she finally came back it was in the company of a big, burly man wearing a turban and a robe with a bunch of stars and quarter-moons and stuff on it.

I walked right up and gave her one of my more chivalrous bows.

"Ma'am," I said, "I been admiring you from afar, and the time has come to announce my everlasting devotion and start admiring you from close up."

"Leave us alone!" said the man gruffly, pushing me on the shoulder, which was about as high up as he could reach.

I busted his ribs and knocked out nine of his teeth as a gentle reproof, but when I turned back to my blue-skinned ideal of pure womanhood she'd already made it onto the airlift. Now, the hotel had some fifteen hundred rooms, and I was perfectly willing to bust down the door of each and every one of 'em in search of her, but then it occurred to me that there might be a less strenuous way, so I mosied over to where the guy with the turban had fallen after I bounced him off the far wall, and I squatted down next to him.

"Howdy, neighbor," I said.

He took one look at me, uttered a shriek of terror, and curled up into a little ball.

"C'mon, friend," I said, kind of forcefully straightening him out and trying not to pay no attention to all the creaking and cracking sounds. "I didn't mean you no harm. I just happen to resent being pushed by little bitty guys with turbans -- and besides, you were standing betwixt me and that which I want most in all the galaxy."

"What I want most is a doctor!" he muttered.

"I never noticed it before, but you got a serious lisp there, friend," I said.

"I didn't have it until you knocked out all my teeth!" he shot back. (Actually, he spat back, but I didn't hold it against him none, since he didn't have anything in the front of his mouth to act as a barrier to all that saliva.)

"You do me a serious injustice," I said, prying his jaws open. "You got lots of teeth left -- hell, I can see at least a dozen from here, counting molars -- and if you want to keep 'em, you'll start answering my questions."

He whimpered a bit at that, but didn't enter into no arguments.

"That blue-skinned lady you was with," I said. "By what name does she go?"

"She is the Star of Bethlehem," he said.

"What is Bethlehem -- some kind of a play or movie?" I asked, hoping against hope that it might even be a strip show.

"That's her name!" he wailed. "Now let me go!"

"Real soon," I said. "I ain't a lot more comfortable sitting here on your chest like this than you are. But if I'm gonna spend the rest of my life with this lady, I gotta know a little more about her. Like, for starters, where does she work?"

"She and I both work on the same planet!" he said, and then he passed out, probably more from fear and shortage of air than anything more major.

Well, since I didn't want no trouble with the local gendarmes, who were still a little miffed at me for busting up Aristotle's Bar and Study Parlor and putting half a dozen of their brethren in the hospital the night before, I slung the guy with the turban over my shoulder, went outside into the cool night air, and wandered around for the better part of an hour before I finally found an emergency room where I could dump him.

(I should probably have asked some questions when I saw that all the other patients were animals -- but at least the veterinarian was open for business in the middle of the night, which is more than I can say for all them rich, stuck-up doctors.)

When I got back to the hotel, I asked the desk clerk where I could find the Star of Bethlehem. He called up some Tri-D star maps on his computer and began looking, so I grabbed him by the collar and shook him a couple of times to make sure I had his attention, and politely suggested that while the Star of Bethlehem might be a lot of things, including a celestial object, the particular stellar body I was looking for was wearing a skin-tight dress and was staying in the hotel.

He apologized and told a servo-mech to mop up the small puddle he'd made on the floor, and then checked the hotel's register, and suddenly turned as white as a sheet.

"You look like you seen a ghost," I said.

"I'm just anticipating," he answered.

Well, I didn't know what he meant, and it wasn't none of my concern anyway, so I said, "What room is she in?"

"She checked out half an hour ago," said the clerk, cringing as if he expected the ceiling to fall on his head.

"Where did she go?" I asked.

"Let me see," he said, messing with the computer.

"You know," I opined, staring at his hands, "you really ought to see a doctor before that palsy gets any worse."

"I plan to see a whole barrage of them the second I'm off duty," he replied. "Ah, here it is. She caught the starliner to Dante II."

"You got any other info on her?" I asked, wondering for instance if she was married, and if she was, was she a fanatic about it?

"Just that her companion listed his profession as assistant to the Mage of the Swirling Mists."

"The Mage of the Swirling Mists?" I repeated, rolling the name around on my tongue and wondering if anyone involved in this situation except me had just a first name and a last one.

"Yes," said the clerk. "I've never seen him, of course, but I've heard that he can foresee the future, explain all the eternal verities, and even predict the roll of the dice."

"Sounds like a handy guy to know," I allowed. "I hope he ain't too good-looking."

"He is the Master of the Mystic Arts," said the clerk. "What matters appearance to a being like that?"

I was more concerned with what they mattered to a being like the Star of Bethlehem, but I kept my thoughts to myself and went to the spaceport, where I climbed into my ship and took off for Dante II, which for the uninitiated was just past the Virgil system, way out on the Spiral Arm.

Took the better part of two weeks to get there, during which time my love for the Star of Bethlehem had blossomed and grown and matured into a beautiful thing of gossamer fragility. I'd been doing a lot of thinking about the pair of us, and I had only one question left, which was would she let me call her Star, since calling her Star of Bethlehem every time I spoke to her could get to be a little tedious.

Once I landed, I made my way through customs -- they'd never heard of me, so it didn't take as long as usual -- and walked out of the spaceport. I figured I might as well get right to business, so I stopped the first pedestrian I saw with the intention of asking him where I could find the Mage of the Swirling Mists, but he just lay peaceful-like where he'd fallen, and after eight or nine minutes my patience began wearing thin, so I just wandered into the city on my own.

Before long I came upon another man walking the streets by himself, and I kind of signaled for him to stop and talk to me.

"Okay," he said, stretching his hands way above his head. "And you can stop pointing the blaster at me. I ain't armed and I ain't dumb enough to run away from a man that's carrying as much firepower as you seem to be."

"That's right reasonable of you, friend," I said. "I got just one thing to ask of you and then you can be on your way."

"Is this some kind of trick question?" he asked nervously. "What'll you do to me if I get it wrong?"

"It ain't no trick," I assured him. "And it's vitally important to my sex life and my emotional well-being." I tried to figure out how to word it without sounding like too much of a country bumpkin, and finally I

blurted out, "Where can I find the Swirling Mists?"

I was all prepared for him to laugh at me, but instead he looked kind of relieved and pointed up the road a way.

"Go to Fourth Street and turn left," he said.

"That's all there is to it?"

"That's it."

I thanked him and hurried off, anxious to clutch the Star of Bethlehem to my manly bosom.

When I got to Fourth Street, I took a left, and walked half a block past a number of theaters and clubs and restaurants, mingling with a bunch of folks who were dressed to the nines, and then suddenly I found myself in front of a blinking holographic sign that proclaimed that I had reached the Swirling Mists Nightclub.

"Welcome, wayfarer," said the doorman, who was dressed exactly like the guy I'd kind of disassembled back on Futzi Minoulli. "Enter the Swirling Mists and let the fabulous Mage astound you with his feats of prestidigitation and legerdemain!"

Well, Prestidigitation and Legerdemain sounded like a couple of Altairean bodyguards, but I didn't want to show my ignorance, so I thanked him and walked on in.

The show was just finishing, and a bunch of chorus girls were on stage, dressed -- or maybe a better word is undressed -- like witches, and doing really interesting things with their broomsticks, but I wasn't here for the high culture the place afforded, but for my Star of Bethlehem, and once I determined that she wasn't anywhere to be seen I mosied backstage and began looking for her.

I tried five or six dressing rooms, and raised a couple of female screams, which struck me as odd since I wasn't seeing nothing they weren't proud to show off onstage, and then I came to the biggest dressing room of all, and there, sitting at a table and staring into a mirror, was this guy with a cone-shaped magician's hat and a long white beard, and a robe that kept changing colors the whole time I looked at it.

"You ain't the Star," I said, making no attempt to hide my disappointment.

"I most certainly am," he replied with dignity. "Don't take my word for it -- go out and look at the marquee. The Mage of the Swirling Mists is the star this and every night."

"And you're the Mage?" I asked.

"That's right."

"Good!" I said. "Where can I find the Star of Bethlehem?"

He looked puzzled. "Second star on the right and straight on til morning?"

"She's a woman," I explained.

"I didn't know they came in sexes," he said. "Fascinating!"

"I thought you knew everything," I said.

"Me?" he replied with a laugh. "I just do card tricks." He reached into the air and produced a deck, then

fanned it out. "Here, take a card, any card."

"I don't care about card tricks!" I yelled.

"Okay, don't lose your temper," he said. He reached behind my ear and suddenly there was an egg in his hand. "There!" he said proudly. "What do you think of that?"

"It's an egg," I said. "Big deal."

"But where did it come from?" he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"_That's_ the kind of stuff everyone says you know," I answered him. "Did it come before the chicken or after? And while we're on the subject, where's the woman I love?"

"How the hell should I know?" said the Mage.

"They told me you knew everything," I said.

"Ah!" he said, his eyes lighting up. "Now I understand. You want the Mage of the _Purple_ Mists! _He_ knows everything. He answers all the questions about life and death and such, and he's never been known to be wrong. Me, I just do sleight of hand."

"You're sure?" I asked, staring at him and trying to decide if he was joking.

"Absolutely," said the Mage. "He works about half a block down the street. And I hear that he's got the most beautiful blue-skinned assistant..."

I didn't wait to hear the rest. I was out the back door before he could finish his sentence, and a minute later I was pounding at the locked door of the Purple Mists.

Finally the door inched open and an skinny old guy stuck his head out.

"Stop pounding!" he said. "I heard you."

"Let me in!" I said.

"We're closed for the season."

"What season?" I said. "What's going on, and when do you open again?"

He shrugged. "How should I know? Maybe never."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. "Where's the Mage of the Purple Mists?"

"He left the planet this afternoon with that beautiful assistant of his," said the old guy.

"When's he coming back?"

"Beats me," was the answer. "Didn't leave no forwarding address neither."

I set off to hunt them down and pledge my love to the Star of Bethlehem, and I spent the next year searching for them without any luck, but then I ran into a couple of Pirate Queens and a High Priestess who looked exactly like she had an extra pair of lungs, and after awhile I couldn't quite remember what the Star actually looked like except for being blue and kind of pretty.

As for the Mage of the Purple Mists, I guess he was everything they said he was. But he couldn't do card

tricks, and people who knew him said he wasn't much with a blaster or a burner, and he was too old to cut the mustard with the Star of Bethlehem, so when I think of him at all, I wonder what knowing all the secrets of the universe was really worth.

* * * *

"Let me take him to High Stakes Eddie's for a night and I'll put a cash value on it," said Bet-a-World O'Grady.

"You know," said Sinderella, "there's more to this secrets of the universe business than meets the eye. Or rather, there's a lot less."

"What do you mean?" asked O'Grady.

"You were listening. The brightest machine in the galaxy couldn't give poor Argyle even as good an answer as some drunken jerk in a bar could, and the Mage of the Swirling Mists does card tricks."

"True," said Baker. "But the Mage of the Purple Mists, now..."

"You don't know anything about him," said Sinderella.

"Except that he's got your Star of Bethlehem," added Max with a smirk.

"She was too perfect," answered Baker.

"How can someone be too perfect?" asked Sinderella.

"She was purity itself," said Baker. "How can you enjoy a roll in the hay if it don't feel dirty?"

"A telling point," agreed Nicodemus Mayflower. "If you don't rut like a couple of farm animals gone wild, and then feel so guilty that you've just got to unload in church, and then change your mind because what you did was so filthy that your minister would never speak to you again -- "

"I ain't never seen, heard, smelled, or even experienced a sex act that could shock my tender sensitivities," interrupted the Reverend Billy Karma. "You've just been going to the wrong church, my son."

"Well, if it doesn't shock you, it should at least shock the pants off God," continued Mayflower.

"God is a mighty understanding critter," said Billy Karma. "And it's been my experience that He likes a spicy story as well as the next man."

"That's some religion you preach," said Max sardonically.

"The best," agreed the Reverend. "I mean, what the hell good's a religion that doesn't attract sinners? That's what keeps God in business -- fresh blood."

"I never looked at it that way," admitted Baker.

"Not many people do," answered Billy Karma. "Or else you'd all get into the preaching biz."

"And God don't shock easy?" continued Baker.

"It's almost as hard to shock God as it is to shock me," said Billy Karma. "Take this little lady here," he added, pointing to Sinderella. "She felt a need to confess her sins this morning, or maybe to brag about

'em a little, and even though we ain't from the same branch of God's family, I sat down and listened to her for three hours." He paused and looked around the Outpost. "Well, brethren, I panted, and I drooled, and my hands started shaking, and once or twice I even went outside to bay the sun (the moon not being in the sky at the time). I stuttered and I stammered and I howled like a dog -- but the one thing I wasn't was shocked. Excited, yes. Inflamed, sure. Aroused, damned right. But shocked? Never!" Then he winked at Sinderella. "We got to have another heart-to-heart real soon now, you hear?"

"I think I been going to the wrong church all my life," said Baker.

"I don't know about that," responded Max. "I mean, to listen to you tell it, the only thing you ever got out of a church service was a vestal virgin or two, and they didn't stay vestal for long."

"You mean virgin," said Sinderella.

"That, too."

"Well, you sure have an interesting way of looking at things, Reverend," said Nicodemus Mayflower.

"I got to," answered Billy Karma. "After all, I'm God's eyes and ears on this here temporal plane of existence."

"He spent most of last night trying to convince me he was God's hands, too," said Silicon Carny.

"You never heard of the laying on of hands?" said the Reverend in mock surprise.

"Not where you were trying to lay them," replied Silicon Carny.

"How about talking in tongues?" asked Max.

"I give up," said Billy Karma. "How about talking in tongues?"

"Can you do it?"

"Usually not until my fifth drink."

"The more I hear about this man's religion, the more I like it," announced Baker.

"The more I hear about it," said Max, "the more it sounds like I've been practicing it for the last twenty years without even knowing it."

"Tell me some more," said Baker. "You got any saints in your religion?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," answered the Reverend Billy Karma. "I thought I was pretty saintly this morning, just sitting there listening to Sinderella without pouncing on her."

"Uh..." began Sinderella meaningfully.

"Without pouncing on her in earnest," he amended.

"Hey, I was there!" she said.

"Okay, without pouncing on her in deadly earnest," said Billy Karma. He turned back to Baker. "All right -- no saints."

"How about prophets?" asked O'Grady, who only seemed to get interested in the conversation when he could bring it around to odds and betting.

"We make more than our fair share, and we're completely tax free," replied the Reverend. "You thinking about taking to the cloth?"

"I meant prophets, not profits," said O'Grady, enunciating carefully. "You know -- the kind of men who make pronouncements and predict the future."

"Men who make pronouncements and predict the future are hanging out in every brokerage house and bookie joint in the galaxy," said Max. "And every last one of 'em dies broke."

"We've had our share of prophets," replied the Reverend. "Including maybe the two most interesting in the history of organized religion."

"Organized religion's been around eight or nine millennia," noted Max dryly.

"Nonsense," said Billy Karma. "Religion didn't get really organized until I writ down all the rules for it maybe fifteen years ago. And since then there have been 53 amendments, as well as two evenings worth of apocrypha experienced at one of the sleazier whorehouses on Talarba VII, and a rejected canon courtesy of an alien lady who had three of everything worthwhile." He winked at Silicon Carny. "There's still time to become the 54th amendment."

"There's still time to be nailed to a cross," she replied.

"What's the matter with you, woman?" he demanded. "Religion's supposed to be enjoyable, or why practice it at all?"

"_I'd_ enjoy it," said Silicon Carny.

"She's got you there, Reverend," said Max. "Fair is fair."

"So what about these two prophets you were mentioning?" asked Baker.

"Don't encourage him," said Max. "He talks enough as it is."

"But think of all the things he can't do while he's busy talking," said Sinderella.

"He wouldn't be doing 'em to me anyway," said Max. He turned to Billy Karma. "Would you?"

"I got to be a lot more desperate than I am right now to work all the way up to _that_ amendment," said the Reverend devoutly. "Now, do you want to hear about these prophets or don't you?"

"I don't know," said Max. "Maybe we ought to take a vote."

"You didn't vote for anyone else's stories," said Billy Karma.

"_They_ didn't waste three million words building up to 'em," said Max. "All in favor of hearing the Reverend Billy Karma drone on about these here prophets say Aye."

"Aye," said Catastrophe Baker.

"All opposed?"

Everyone else in the Outpost hollered "Nay!"

Max looked at Baker, and saw a little something in his eyes that made him think twice.

"The ayes have it," said Max.